

## 39. ORGANIZATION OF AMERICAN STATES (OAS)

### BACKGROUND

The Organization of American States (OAS) was formed in 1948 at the Ninth International Conference of American States in Bogota, Colombia. The OAS' forerunner was the International Bureau of American Republics or the Pan American Union, which was established in 1890. The OAS charter provides for the peaceful settlement of disputes, common action against aggression, the promotion of representative democracy, economic, social and cultural development and calls for efforts to limit the spread of conventional weapons in the region. The Charter also prohibits direct or indirect intervention in the affairs of any state and prohibits the use of economic or political coercive measures by any state. At present, there are thirty-four member states of the OAS.

The OAS structure includes a number of administrative bodies. The Consultative Meeting of Ministers of Foreign Affairs meets to discuss matters of urgency, usually relating to conflict or potential conflict. The OAS General Assembly meets annually and when it is not in session, the Permanent Council operates. In addition, there is an Inter-American Economic and Social Council, a Council for Education, Science and Technology and an Inter-American Judicial Committee. There is also an Inter-American Court of Human Rights and an Inter-American Defence Board.

In spite of the wide-ranging provisions in the OAS Charter, over time the organization has not lived up to its potential. Critics allege that it has been an instrument of US hegemony, or of military dictatorships, or of both. It has been further argued that when US interests in the region cannot be advanced by the OAS, the US acts unilaterally. In the 1980s, moreover, the OAS was unable to deal effectively with important problems such as the conflict in Central America, suggesting that the dispute settlement provisions were of little use. The success of the Contadora Group of five Central American states, which eventually devised a regional solution to the Central American conflict, also appeared to underline the inadequacies of the OAS.

However, moves towards democracy in some countries and the steps taken towards the resolution of conflict in Central American have generated renewed hopes for progress in regional cooperation. There has been a movement among member states of the OAS to revive the organization and make it more responsive to national and regional needs.